

A NOTE ON THE RUSHVILLE RUNESTONE

by
James L. Murphy
Ohio State University Libraries
1858 Neil Avenue Mall
Columbus, Ohio 43210

More than twenty years ago, in the summer of 1972, I was tangentially involved in an unusual discovery near Rushville, Fairfield County, Ohio. This engraved piece of locally derived Vinton sandstone has been described as the "Ohio Runestone," (Farley 1989, McCulloch 1990), but since it is quite likely that other Ohio runestones may eventually surface, I prefer to refer to this one as the Rushville Runestone.

Whatever it is called, McCulloch (1990) has conclusively demonstrated that the carving was made very recently, subsequent to 1940, and cannot date to the Viking era. He has shown that it is in fact a precise duplication of a set of runes used to illustrate an archaeological romance published by Nevil Shute in that year (Shute 1940).

The purpose of the present note is to document the exact location of the Rushville find and to clarify the nature of the discovery.

The Rushville Runestone was discovered by Erich Kennedy in the spring of 1972, lying on the hillside immediately above a large spring, along the northern side of a small tributary of Rush Creek, 0.2 mile north of Rushville. An artificial dam was constructed to form a small pond here many years ago, as shown in Figure 1, a photo postcard dated 1908 and labeled "The Old Spring, Rushville, O." Although now overgrown, the area clearly has been a popular picnic area in the past.

Shortly after its discovery, Erich Kennedy showed me the precise location of the runestone find, and the impression in the ground where the stone had lain was still clearly evident. The find of the stone was a few feet to the left of the young man seated at the edge of the cliff in Figure 1. The runestone was found face-down, along the small path that skirts the cliff edge.

Only a few hundred feet to the northeast of this spring lies the Early Woodland Hyde mound (Murphy 1989: 379), which Erich and Clyde Kennedy and I partially excavated in 1972.

Not long after the find, Erich Kennedy wrote "The day after talking with you my father and I took a walk in the woods, I found a rock [about 1' wide and 10" tall] and it look[ed] like this." (Kennedy to

Murphy, April 15, 1972). Kennedy's drawing of the runestone is shown in Fig. 2. (Actual dimensions of the stone are somewhat less than those given by Kennedy in his letter. According to Farley (1989: 133) it measures 7 by 8 inches.)

On first seeing the runestone, I dismissed it as a relatively recent production. This was based partly upon the relative softness of the siltstone and lack of weathering of the runes which were carved or scratched (not pecked) in the stone, partly upon the location. When pressed, while emphasizing that estimates based upon degree of weathering are notoriously imprecise, I speculated that it was probably no more than 20 or 30 years old, possibly 50 but certainly not 500 years. In fact, the carvings looked like they had been scratched with a knife or nail and could have been much more recent.

Kennedy was unhappy with this assessment, and I suggested that he contact Gloria Farley, who was actively studying the Heavener, Oklahoma, runestone at the time. This lead eventually to a translation (Syverson 1979: 28) indicating that the runestone marked "Hakr's Burial Mound." Unfortunately, the translator was laboring under the misconception that the stone had been found on the Hyde burial mound, an error that apparently affected his translation. According to Farley (1989: 133), other runestone experts have disagreed with this translation, but they do not appear to have published an alternative.

The point becomes somewhat moot, in the face of McCulloch's discovery (1990) that the Ohio or Rushville Runestone is a precise copy of an inscription used to illustrate the Nevil Shute romance novel, "An Old Captivity." In Shute's novel, "Haki" and "Hekja" are the young lovers in a Norse dream sequence, in which their marriage is performed by no less a light than Leif Ericson, who carves their names on the stone. Shute's novel was first published in 1940 but went through several editions, including a paperback edition published in 1962.

It will be noted that Kennedy's drawing of the inscription differs slightly from Shute's, notably in the presence of the small dot in the first line and in conjoining the two characters at the right end of the

second line, due to a faint crack or bedding plane in the stone. Without knowledge of the Shute novel, Mrs. Farley more accurately transcribed these two characters but added two horizontal lines that do not appear on the actual stone. Also, as McCulloch points out, the stone appears to have been broken, removing all but a trace of the fourth character in the top line.

McCulloch rightly dismisses this runestone as the innocent diversion of an unknown person spending an afternoon reading Shute's novel in the romantic setting of Rushville's "Old Spring." He justifiably draws the moral that care should be taken in interpreting such individual surface finds. (One could also conclude that some people should probably not read novels. What if it had been a murder mystery?)

Equally innocent, I think, was the discovery of the stone. Such finds, once disproved, are often credited to the discoverer; but I am certain that Erich Kennedy was not the fabricator of the Rushville runestone. The discrepancies between his version of the runes and the original Shute version are significant and indicate an unfamiliarity with Shute's original text. The enthusiasm with which the runestone was embraced by its discoverer, not stopping short of a trip to Norway in order to confirm its genuineness, also bespeaks a genuine belief in the stone's authenticity.

References

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Fig. 1 (Murphy) Postcard view of the Old Spring at Rushville. The Runestone was found just to the left of the young man in the photograph.

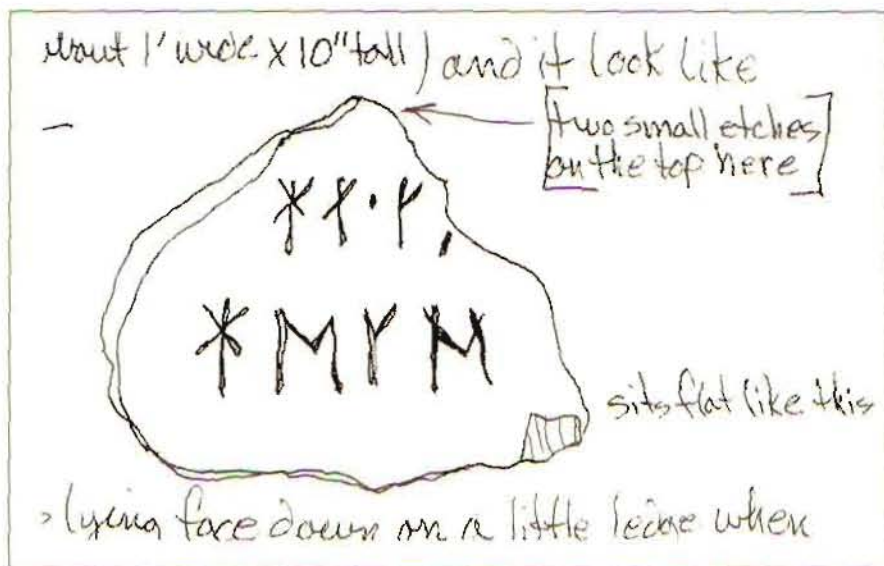


Fig. 2 (Murphy) Drawing of the Rushville Runestone by Erich Kennedy. Letter to the Author, 1972.

Presently the men dispersed a little; Haki drew Hekja over to the stone and showed her the carvings. He explained it to her. "These cuts mean my name, and those cuts mean yours. Leif has just done it."

She fingered the marks, trying to understand the wonder. Crouching down by the stone, she raised her eyes to Leif. "Lord, are these cuts our names?"

HAKI
HEKJA

He smiled down at them. "So, Haki and Hekja. Your names are now together, for as long as this stone shall endure."

Fig. 3 (Murphy) Original "Inscription" from Nevil Shute's "An Old Captivity" (New York: Wm. Morrow & Co., 1940)